

Sir Kenneth Adam OBE

Born in Germany in 1921, Sir Kenneth's family fled to England before WWII, where he joined the RAF and flew Typhoons until the end of the war. He always wanted to be in films, but it was a lucky break from his sister that helped him on his way – starting with *Captain Horatio Hornblower* (1951), then the *Bond* movies and, ultimately, Oscars for *Barry Lyndon* (1975) and *The Madness of King George* (1994).

Sir Kenneth is a regular at the Pall Mall clubhouse and lives in London. He talks to Peter Foubister about cars, films and adventure.

On Bond....

We discussed what would be the sexiest sports car because in some of Fleming's books, Bond had a green Bentley, which I loved – but we had to bring it up to date. I had an E-Type Jaguar, which was a lot cheaper than an Aston Martin, but I said the Aston was the most prestigious sports car in England. They were not at all keen to let us have one free of charge... But I said they needed to speak to the producer and after the film came out, their sales went up by something over 40 per cent. From that moment onwards, we got any car we wanted.

We had a brilliant special effects engineer, Johnny Stears, who could do anything. So, I decided, let's have everything! With the Aston DB5 we had all the gadgets – I was getting rid of all my inhibitions, in a way. The E-Type didn't have a bumper, so when it was parked nearly every day there were always scratches and I suppose I was getting my own back. They built the car and the ejector seat did work – this was going back to my days as a fighter pilot, even though we didn't have ejector seats in the planes at the time; the Typhoon was considered quite a dangerous plane.

As a kid, I was always building models and aeroplanes so it was in my blood – I liked mechanical toys, and remember the Lotus Esprit in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). I liked the streamline shape, and I said it'd make a good submarine. We had it going underwater at 7 knots and you had to wear breathing equipment, but we also had a model in the Bahamas. I always had these wonderful special effects people – like Johnny for the Aston and Derek Meddings for the Lotus.

The last Bond I did was *Moonraker* (1979). We did it in France and we had to build a centrifuge. So I designed it, and Derek Meddings was standing behind me – he said it's a typical model shot, but I said I want to build it full size, I was always like that. Derek was furious with me, but we found a Frenchman who built it full size.

I worked in China and all over the world and I found that even if you don't speak the same language, you speak the same film language. As long as you have a pencil and you can make yourself understood, you will always find good people. When I think back on it, I must have been a little crazy really.

...And Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang (1968) was a car I designed from scratch. I found it extremely difficult – I had thought I could design anything, but this had to be a turn-of-the-century car, good for children. We built a mock up in the plaster shop at Pinewood. I can remember today that I kept changing my mind.

Alan Mann – the race team owner – built the car and when it arrived at Pinewood the whole studio was watching. I based it on a Bugatti radiator and the old Rolls Royce that had a ship's body, so it was tremendously successful. Obviously it didn't fly, but it did swim as a hovercraft in the south of France. We built it on top of a speedboat, with the skirt around, and it really worked.

On Films...

When I was 15 I was told that if I wanted to become an art director in films, then I should have an architectural background. I studied architecture for three years before the war, and I was articled by a firm of architects – that was a stepping stone.

During the war I met famous producers, like Powell, and they promised me the world when the war was over. But when the end came, they said I ought to be a member of the union. But to join the union, you had to work in a studio for six weeks – it was a vicious circle. By chance, I had a sister working for the American Embassy. One day, a man came in and said he was a prop buyer for a film studio and he needed help getting American props. She said she could help him – could he help her young brother who had just come out of the RAF? And that's how I got into films.

I had a very good relationship with Sean [Connery] and later with Roger Moore, but my own creative impulses centred on designing my type of background sets and dealing with the mechanical toys.

I'm credited with some of the biggest film sets in the world and, believe me, in hindsight, I think I was a little mad to try all that. It took a lot of courage, but also needed a first class team of people around me. I was very lucky that I had such great people working with me. Even though there were breaks between the films, as much as possible, I tried to keep the team together.

Knowing that I had these great people meant I had no restrictions imposed on my dreaming. I'll never forget that when I built Fort Knox [*Goldfinger*, 1964] I looked at the exterior, which was a very dull 1920s art deco style square building, and decided that we would build it in Pinewood's back lot exactly as it was... but the interior!

Nobody was allowed inside, not even the President of the USA, so I decided to build it like a cathedral of gold. It was completely impractical in reality; the set was about 50 feet high with gold stacked up to the top. After the film was released, United

Artists had some irate letters from American people, asking how is it possible that a British film unit was allowed to film inside Fort Knox, when not even their president is allowed inside? That was a great compliment.

I'd worked for nearly 30 years in England, France and elsewhere. When I started in films in England, nearly all the directors were American – they taught me a great deal about the Hollywood school of filming, and it really appealed to me. During the time I worked in Hollywood, I never once felt like a stranger. Maybe that was because Americans trained me during the war. And John Garfield was making a film called *Air Force* (1943) and he spent a lot of time with me, encouraging me.

I lived on the old Malibu Road in Malibu, California – we were very happy there, on and off, in the eighties and nineties. Living on the beaches in Malibu reminded me of London during the Blitz – there was always an element of danger; fire jumping across PCH [Pacific Coast Highway] or big tidal waves...

Once, I was filming in Arizona and my wife was in the beach house. There were terrible fires, and as she couldn't drive, I said I'd phone every 20 minutes to check she was okay. There was great comradeship and the neighbours helped. Fortunately, the house wasn't touched, but there was a time when a wave went in, ripped out the inside of the house and took it all back out into the ocean.

But even though I was working films, I always made a point of going to the reunions for 609 Squadron and it was amazing the friendships one had developed during the Second World War. I was immediately at ease with the people I flew with; it was never the same sort of atmosphere in a film or anything like that. These were people you had lived – and some died – with. The affection was incredible. I might have become a big film producer, but I was still 'Heine the Tank Buster' to them.

...His favourites... the Oscars...

I'm probably most famous for the Bonds, for creating a style. But in hindsight the film that gave me the most satisfaction was *Dr Strangelove* for Stanley Kubrick. I'll never forget the moment I was called to contribute after Stanley died. Spielberg came up to me and said, 'Ken, I want you to know that I think your work on *Dr Strangelove* is the best thing you've ever done, and I think it's the best set ever designed.'

While the design of the war room set was quite simple, it created the right kind of atmosphere for the actors. Peter Sellers and the others all got into this madness – how to depict the end of the world. It inspired them; it was like an 'illness' which caught them and some of them gave their best ever performances. I won a BAFTA in England and received an Oscar nomination.

The Academy Awards I won were for something quite different – *Barry Lyndon* and then *The Madness of King George*. I had five nominations, but when it came to the

crunch, I didn't even have a speech prepared. I said to myself, 'I don't want to win this, the nomination is good enough.' I was quite nervous, walking up to the stage, literally facing the world, as well as the 3-4000 people in the cinema, but it was obviously incredibly exciting.

...And ships, starting with Captain Hornblower

We built the frigate for *Captain Hornblower* (1951) with Gregory Peck. Bernard Voisin and myself found a three-masted schooner on the border with Spain, which had been used for cod fishing off the banks of Newfoundland.

It had two very old diesel engines so we towed it from Set near the Spanish border to Villefranche, where Bernard had his boatyard and we ballasted the hull with 200 tons of ballast and then started building from that.

I built a phoney hull on top and Bernard welded columns around the existing masts to get the right dimensions. It was the first period ship and I had to sail it across to Ischia. It had over 1000 metres of square sails. I couldn't find any sailors in England, so I found some drunken Britons from Brittany. I had a crew of 26 and I was always worried they'd fall into the water...

Cars – including an all-black Mini and a special Rolls

One of my first cars was an American Packard that fell to pieces. A friend in Fulham Road bought it, and I saw a supercharged Mercedes 540k with visible pipes on the side. I was told it would be too much trouble, what with petrol rationing because of Suez and seven miles to the gallon, or something like that.

I rang my wife and said, 'Darling, I've sold the Packard, but I have to show you something...' She came by taxi and looked at the Mercedes and said it was wonderful, so I bought it for about £450. And, okay, they must have spent a fortune on it but that same Mercedes was sold at auction for about \$2million.

After that I had one of the first Minis. I was working at Shepperton and there was a racing garage nearby, so they hotted up this little Mini. It was before the Cooper came in and I took it to Italy and nobody believed it. I painted it all black and the Italians called it the Scarafaggio – the cockroach – they couldn't believe it was doing over 100miles an hour.

Then I had the E-Type that had a top speed of 140mph. I said to a friend, 'can you give me another 10 miles?' He agreed, and fitted a straight exhaust. I was driving practically all the way to Sicily on the motorway, with my wife sitting next to me. She said, 'there's something wrong with this car, I'm boiling here' – the exhaust went straight beneath her!

Then I had a Lotus – it was one of the kit cars and I had nothing but problems with it, but then I was driving it very hard. I knew Colin Chapman – you really need a mechanic with that car. We were invited out one evening, in dinner jackets and, having been an ex-fighter pilot I was used to always looking at the gauges. I saw the oil pressure had gone to zero so I pulled off the side of the M4 – the engine had seized up. They were built like racing cars.

Then I was going through town and saw the Rolls-Royce in the window and I still have it, a 1959 Silver Cloud. Mulliner only built 12 of that model as a drop head coupe. They had converted the Silver Cloud four door saloon into a two door drop head coupe. It's very special – I've done the interior but still need to do up the leather!

Ends